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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3833
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORP WASHDC 0008

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 YEREVAN 001204

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DEPT FOR EUR/CARC

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/05/2016

TAGS: PGOV PREL KMCA KDEM AM

SUBJECT: SETTING THE STAGE FOR FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS IN ARMENIA

REF: A. (A) 05 YEREVAN 1731

¶B. (B) 05 YEREVAN 2081

YEREVAN 00001204 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: DCM Anthony Godfrey for reasons 1.4(b & d).

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: Election experts offer mixed views of ongoing efforts to improve key democratic institutions prior to the May 2007 parliamentary election. The challenges -- technical, bureaucratic and political -- are daunting. However there is room for cautious optimism that the GOAM is at least trying to fix its voter list problem. However, USAID implementers are not optimistic that the new, improved voter registry database will be ready in time for the presumed May 2007 election, meaning that improvements, if any, will be only incremental. END SUMMARY.

VOTER REGISTRIES: E PLURIBUS UNUM

¶12. (U) Poloff recently met with USAID implementers IFES and local NGO It's Your Choice (IYC) to discuss progress the GOAM has been making to improve electoral procedures (reflets). Both groups are assisting the GOAM in updating its voter registry and electoral code; their activity is part of the USG's Democracy Promotion Strategy (for more info, visit www.usa.am, and click 'Democracy Programs'). The GOAM decided last year to consolidate its voter rolls, in response to international criticism. Previously, there was no central voter registry; each local district maintained its own individual voter list, meaning that in practice each district had its own (usually quite bad) database-management practices. The GOAM decided to centralize the voter rolls into one list held by OVIR, the passport and visa agency, which is a branch of the National Police service. It was thought that because the GOAM provides every citizen above the age of 16 a passport that serves as both a domestic identity card and as an international passport, the OVIR database would be the most complete. This was the voter list used during local elections in October and later for the Constitutional Referendum in November 2005.

¶13. (C) IFES Chief of Party Chedomir Flego explained the limitations of the current OVIR database and suggestions that IFES has made to the GOAM to improve the accuracy of the list. According to Flego, in accordance with last year's election code changes, OVIR is in the process of converting its current, antiquated, DOS-based "Clipper" database of passport issuance and name changes, to a more

modern, Oracle-based database. Flego outlined the significant technical challenges involved in transferring data from the old poorly-maintained database. A particular problem includes standardizing the spellings and formats of Armenian names, which have previously been haphazard. This is particularly an issue when transliterating the Armenian names into English, a necessity for the international passport functionality of the database. (For example, there are three Armenian letters that may all be transliterated alternately as "CH" or "J"; the traditional "-ian" ending of Armenian names is also often transliterated "-yan" or "-iyan"; etc.) Keeping track of Armenians who have modified their last names between Russified and Armenianized variations since independence is another issue.

¶4. (C) All indications are that the new database itself has not yet been finished -- despite the GOAM's legislated deadline of July 1. Meanwhile, there is understandably little appetite to expend major effort and resources on cleaning up the older database, on the verge of being scrapped, despite the likelihood that authorities will have to use the older "Clipper" database as the basis for the 2007 voter lists, since the Oracle database is unlikely to be ready. (COMMENT: A reality that the GOAM does not yet care to acknowledge, perhaps even to itself. END COMMENT) IFES has recommended to the National Police Service that it crosscheck the "Clipper" data against what IFES believes is a more precise database, the one used for Social Security Card issuance, since the latter records deaths and changes of addresses more regularly and accurately. IFES points out that since the Social Security database is used to deliver actual cash benefits, individuals have a much stronger incentive to report changes of address to that agency, while the government has a strong anti-fraud interest in weeding out the deceased. Neither factor pertains to the passport database. IFES plans a study trip to Estonia in September to familiarize OVIR officials with

YEREVAN 00001204 002.2 OF 003

the workings of a better-managed voter registry. Despite some rumblings from the authorities, IFES believes that once the new voter registry database is constructed, OVIR will run a check of the "Clipper" data against that held by Social Security before dumping it into the new system.

¶5. (C) While IFES is working with those who compile the voter lists in Yerevan, IYC is on the ground in the electoral districts, and through monitoring and education, is assisting voting officials and voters to create an atmosphere for free and fair elections on the micro level. Because it is seen as politically neutral, IYC commands respect from the GOAM and local governing councils. While IYC was mostly responsible for lobbying that the voter registry be centralized, it was critical of the actual lists that appeared at polling centers during last year's local elections and constitutional referendum. Its representatives were active in assisting local election officials to trim lists of deceased individuals and emigres. IYC President Harutyun Hambardzumyan told Poloff that he believes that in several instances, particular polling places were given intentionally inaccurate lists. IYC, Hambardzumyan said, was active in alerting the GOAM that such activities did not go unnoticed. To that end, IYC applauds the GOAM's recent decision to put the voter list's accuracy to the voters, by asking them to check online to confirm that their names appear on the list. IYC believes that opening the list to this kind of scrutiny will provide for the transparency that the process has sorely lacked in the past. (NOTE: A Pol/Econ LES employee recently tried to find her name on the list online; the website was slow or did not respond at all. END NOTE.)

ELECTORAL CODE REFORMS: TO INK OR NOT TO INK?

¶ 6. (U) The newest changes and emendations to the Armenian Election Code are in the midst of the legislative process. After the initial draft passed out of Parliamentary committee, it went for comment by the Council of Europe's Venice Commission of experts, which has made extensive annotations to the bill. With many MPs on vacation throughout August, the GOAM has not yet commented on the Commission's suggestions, though IFES and IYC have both reviewed the Venice Commission's remarks and have made comments of their own. Parliament is expected to give the bill a first reading when it reconvenes on September 11. Most analysts believe the new election code will become law by year's end in time for the 2007 legislative elections scheduled for May. (NOTE: Though rumors of early elections abound, few Mission contacts believe this likely. END NOTE.)

¶ 7. (C) IFES also points to the independence of the Central Election Commission (CEC) as the most important of the Venice Commission recommendations. With an impartial CEC, separate from oligarchs and politicians and in control of the unified voter list, Flego remarked, the chances of a flawed election would be greatly reduced. The IFES Chief of Party said that he looked forward to see how the GOAM would comment on the Venice Commission's emendation proposals, especially with the upcoming visit of a representative of that organization in mid-September.

¶ 8. (C) IYC's recommendations for the new election code are for significant, though low-tech solutions, to many of the immediate problems it has seen at polling places. Of their suggestions, the most important is their plan to use finger inking to prevent multiple voting. Hambardzumyan claims the GOAM has mocked this idea and has attempted to portray finger-inking as a sign of illiteracy. With regard to the CEC, IYC believes that the Commission has too much power and agrees with Venice Commission experts that the rights of observers should be increased. Hambardzumyan told Poloff, somewhat optimistically, that with an increased role of international organizations and observers in the election process, it would be too difficult for the GOAM to ignore their demands and those of the general populace for free and fair elections.

COMMENT

¶ 9. (C) Centralization of the voter registry as a positive step, as is the ongoing work to convert to a more modern database. Central management at least removes the lists from political manipulation at the local level and makes

YEREVAN 00001204 003.2 OF 003

the voter list making process easier to monitor. While OVIR -- under the National Police -- may not be the most logical bureaucratic home for the voter registry, at least the agency is seen as a more honest broker than most other organizations that might have been chosen. One school of thought is that even if some authorities may yet scheme to rig the elections, the GOAM is tired of taking flak for its deeply flawed voter lists and is genuinely working to fix them. Though this new, improved database probably will not be complete by May 2007, we can hope this at least demonstrates political will not to tamper with the voter lists themselves. Many others in Yerevan are less optimistic. END COMMENT.

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